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Chapter 6

Community as policy:
Reflections on community engagement, empowerment and social action in a changing policy context

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Chapter Aims

This chapter draws on 68 interviews and six focus groups conducted with representatives from 62 below the radar groups and community network organisations between 2009 and 2015 and aims to explore:

- The changing meanings of community and the power of community in policy discourse
- The expectations placed on communities and community groups to deliver on a range of policy agendas
- The capacity, and willingness, of community groups to engage with Government agenda.

As such it broadens the debate beyond responses to austerity (Chapter 5) to place the idea of 'below the radar' activity both at the centre and the periphery of policy thinking over the last decade.

Background

In a Cabinet Office press release (5th August 2010) not long after the election of the Coalition Government The Communities Secretary. Eric Pickles, announced 'Today we are turning Government upside down' by returning decision making to the local, 'nano', level. At the same time, the Minister for the Cabinet Office argued 'Big Society' was to be a radical departure from the previous Government's policies in that it was 'a real cultural shift' and an end to 'big Government, just tweaking things at the centre of power'.

Beyond Government, there was, post the-2010 election, a recognition by academics and commentators that:
'*Bottom-up and community-led activities which so often bubble along under the radar are receiving new public recognition. This is in part because we are on the threshold of political change and deep economic restraint…[but also] ' taps into 'a powerful tradition of mutualism, co-operatives and the social economy – a tradition which straddles different ideological standpoints'* (Oppenheim *et al* 2010 p2)

The Coalition, in the early days,presented Big Society as an opportunity to re-frame the relationship between Government and communities. The term Third Sector which, under New Labour, assumed a cohesive and coherent sector, gave way to the more fluid terminology of civil society. Community engagement all but disappeared from policy discourse in favour of an apparently more dynamic 'social action'. Regeneration, as personified by the plethora of Area Based Initiatives post-1997, as a top down set of target drive directives was to be replaced by community led, or community driven, change: '*creating more responsible and active communities where people play a part on making society a better place'* (Maude and Hurd 2010)

Whilst concerns were expressed about initial announcements about the introduction of austerity measures and associated cuts to budgets, for some, policy, under the badge of Big Society, offered a platform to transform the power and role of communities and community groups in policy formation and reshaping of the relationship between those groups, the established voluntary sector and Government (Coote 2010, Rowson et al 2010, Chanan and Miller, 2010).

At one level, however, it is possible to overplay 2010 as a sea change in political thinking about community. After all, in the early years of New Labour administrations, community was promoted as part of the solution: promoting regeneration (Social Exclusion Unit 2001) from the bottom up, developing community enterprise (again a theme across administrations) in areas where the market had failed (Cabinet Office 2006, HM Govt. 2011) and sustaining a communitarian vision of social justice. Later, post the 2001 riots in northern cities and, particularly, the attacks on 9/11 in New York and 7/7 in London, community seemed to again (for later administrations) become part of the problem as well as the solution. In came the Respect agenda and Prevent, the prevention of violent extremism legislation. Regeneration programmes had, largely, failed to transform the communities they had been targeted on: despite substantial investment (CLG 2010 a).

Further (as noted in Chapter 5), whilst the policy language changed in 2010, there were striking similarities in policy concerning community both before and after the 2010 election. Participatory budget setting remained, as did the emphasis on the role of social enterprise. The *National Citizen Service* bore more than a passing resemblance to youth volunteering proposals in *Building Britain's Future* (HM Government: 2009). There were echoes of double devolution and '*communities in control*' (CLG 2008) in the Localism Act and asset transfer (CLG 2007) remained, though in an extended form (McCabe 2011). Both Labour and Conservative 2010 election manifestos emphasised the need for voluntary organisations to diversify their funding base to be less dependent on Government. At the time of the election, Labour was also committed to unspecified budget reductions.

Underlying these apparent continuities , however, there was, a subtle, but important, change in the use of the very term community in political and practice discourses. Historically, community was shorthand for 'good'. If a profession had a problem with its public image the word community was added as a useful prefix: community policing or community architects. More recently the meaning depended on where the word was placed in a sentence. Community cohesion and community participation may be inherently 'good' concepts. But once the term was applied after a noun it became a shorthand meaning for difficulty or problem; the migrant and refugee community, the Roma community and so forth. Again this reflected the contested nature of 'community' (Somerville 2011) and its changing fortune in various policy arenas (Taylor 2012) which had long been recognised in academic discourse.

From community engagement to social action?

In June 2010 the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Third Sector Partnership Board Task and Finish Group on Deprived Neighbourhoods produced a discussion paper and recommendations on the role of the voluntary and community sector in deprived neighbourhoods. This made explicit reference to 'below' or 'under' the radar community groups, with recommendations in the executive summary (p. 4):

'*Developing the Big Society will be enhanced by:*

4) Development work on 'below the radar organisations' which ensures greater visibility, connection and working with civil society organisations traditionally missed by local partnerships and programmes.

5) A re-appraisal of existing VCS (Voluntary and Community Sector) policy to ensure greater relevance and inclusion of largely unfunded groups including wider civil society organisations'.

These papers go on to argue for the 'transformative role' of the voluntary and community sector in deprived neighbourhoods which 'is virtually without limit' (Executive Summary, p. 6). Such an interpretation of the role of the sector was, as noted, for some, a welcome recognition of the importance of small, community based, groups and activities, which, in the words of the Community Sector Coalition (undated), had been *Unseen, Unequal, Untapped.*

Whilst Big Society, as a policy 'strap-line' was short lived, some of the core principles remained in the Localism Act (2011). For the first time the concept of community rights was enshrined in legislation: the rights to challenge, manage and buy existing services or assets. Again, this was broadly welcomed in parts of the sector (for example Community Matters and Locality as national community sector organisations) though with rather muted technical criticisms that the timescales involved in exercising these rights were not feasible for smaller organisations, particularly in deprived neighbourhoods, in the face of potential private sector competition (Kail 2011).

The early years of the Coalition Government, then, represented a high water mark in terms of political rhetoric around the concept of community and the role of community groups. Yet such rhetoric begged, at least, three questions:

- What was meant by 'social action' in recent political discourse?
- Did community groups have the capacity, or willingness, to engage in a 'transformative' role?
- What have been the experiences of community groups themselves in relationship to policy shifts over time?

Firstly, when the term social action is used – what does it actually mean? Its roots, in the literature, lie in the radical traditions of Freire (1970) and Alinsky (1971): citizens taking direct action to challenge injustice or hold the powerful to account. Indeed, one of the first moves of the Coalition Government was to fund the Locality managed Community Organisers programme – with its roots in the American Industrial Areas Foundation and War on Poverty - as a more radical alternative to, more consensual, UK based models of community development (Craig *et al* 2011).

As early as 2011, however, it became apparent that social action meant volunteering rather than anything more direct or radical. The Tottenham disturbances occurred following a peaceful demonstration about the shooting dead by the police of Mark Duggan, a young Black man, on 7 August 2011. Whilst the disturbances were roundly condemned, the post-riot community clean-ups were praised as an example of what voluntary effort, social action, could achieve (Dillon and Fanning 2013). Alinsky, as Taylor (2011) has pointed out, would probably be *'spinning in his grave'* at the co-option of social action by a political establishment.

Yet it is possible to over-emphasis the changing terminology between New Labour administrations and the Coalition. As Mayo et al (2013) noted, the former's investment in active citizenship and learning for democratic participation (Active Learning for Active Citizenship) was relatively short lived and replaced by the Together We Can programme with its emphasis on more traditional models of volunteering.

Secondly, did community groups have the capacity, or willingness, to engage in 'transformation' on government terms? The early agendas of the Coalition Government – first in the Big Society debate (Ishkanian and Szreter 2012) and subsequently in the implementation of the Localism Act (2011) – had an implicit assumption that voluntary action is an infinite resource. Yet, in terms of levels of participation, there was a 'glass half empty, glass half full' debate, depending on different perspectives. For example, from one view point: 'Half the public do not actually want to be involved in decision-making in their local area. Even more – 55% – do not wish to be involved in decision-making in the country as a whole' (Ministry of Justice/Hansard Society, 2009: 36). Indeed, the Conservative Party manifesto on 'Big Society Not Big Government' (2010), whilst aspiring to increase community action, notes that 'volunteering levels have remained static since 2001 and only 3% of the population participate in civic society'.

In contrast, the Ipsos MORI Survey of Third Sector Organisations (2009) found that voluntary and community organisations did want to engage in the delivery of public services and that the key determinant in positive relationships between the sector and local/central government was the extent to which they could influence both local and national policy decisions.

There has been substantial debate about the perceived decline in civil society or social capital (Putnam, 2000). Yet, in its 2010 survey of volunteering, Communities and Local Government (CLG. b) found that:

> 'In 2008-09, 26 per cent of people in England participated in formal volunteering at least once a month. This represents a fall since 2005 when 29 per cent of people participated, although there was no statistically significant change relative to 2007-08 (27%). Thirty-five per cent of people in England participated in informal volunteering at least once a month, a fall since 2005 when the figure was 37 per cent. Again, there was no change relative to 2007-08 (35%).

If these statistics are interpreted negatively (e.g. 79% of the population do not volunteer) then there is a view that civil society is, if not in crisis, certainly static or in gradual decline. However, the data only applies to 'formal volunteering' rather than the wealth of informal community activities which take place 'below the radar' and in black and minority ethnic communities (Phillimore *et al* 2010). Further, the above figures look particularly robust when compared to data on public participation in the democratic process:

> 'Eleven per cent of adults can be classified as 'political activists', according to the [National Audit Office] definition, i.e. in the last two or three years they have done at least three political activities from a list of eight…... Over half the public (51%) report not having done any of these activities, an increase of three points since last year. Compared to 37% who had made charitable donations' (Ministry of Justice/Hansard Society, 2009).

In short, David Cameron has said that the Conservative Manifesto was "an invitation to join the government of Britain"[i] The current data on volunteering activity lead us to question whether there are enough people willing to do so. As Mohan (2015) argues, however successive governments so or do not intervene to promote voluntary action, rates of volunteering have, historically, remained consistent over time and exists out-with direct Government interventions.

Finally, there are concerns about how community groups have experienced both policy shifts in expectations around their role – and the ways that ongoing austerity measures shape opportunity and experiences.

From Big Society, through Localism to policy neglect

The previous chapter explored how below the radar community groups and activities were affected by austerity measures and their strategies for survival. But has their role in, and response to, policy implementation changed since that, high, albeit rhetorical, water mark of Big Society and localism?

What emerges is a 'double retreat' from policy which emphasised the transformative power of community groups in recent years and, particularly, post the 2015 election.On the one hand that retreat has been by Government. The Government strategy for building a stronger civil society (HM Govt. 2010. a) makes explicit reference to voluntary and community groups, as had the Office of the Third Sector (2010). By 2011, the strategy for social investment (HM Govt. 2011) talks almost exclusively about social enterprise. By 2012 Alcock notes that Government pronouncements exclude community or community organisations, a trend that has continued into the Conservative administration. Rather, Ministers talk about voluntary organisations and social enterprises. For example, interviewed in Third Sector magazine (January 2015), Rob Wilson, the Minister for Civil Society stated that

"We need to find a much more active and responsive system.... we have to help build much more capacity in the [voluntary] *sector to be able to deliver what Government is going to need in the future".*

Gone is the weight of expectation (HM Government, 2010.b) that community groups can deliver not only 'more for less' but also:

- the restoration of faith in political systems;
- more cohesive communities;
- greater equality and 'fairness'.

This decline in apparent policy interest within Government coincided with a heated and prolonged debate within the voluntary sector about its role and core values. For some (TSRC 2013) the presentation of distinctive sectoral values became subsumed into presenting the sector in terms of purely economic terms: cost benefit analysis, social return on investment and the savings that Government can generate though contracting with voluntary organisations. For others, at least part of the sector (see also Chapter 4 for an Irish perspective on this debate) had 'sold out' post-2010:

‘We see large national charities continue to develop as private sector look-a-like [sub] contractors driven to increase their market share in a privatised Welfare State. Many middle sized local voluntary services will decline and vanish, with the loss of expertise and accumulated practice experience, or revert to their historical roots of small volunteer-based community groups, operating outside market regimes.’ NCIA (2015 p 16).In this scenario: ‘alternatives to the market and radical action will mostly be found in
informal groups and networks operating on the basis of mutual aid, reciprocity, activism and conviviality’ (NCIA 2015 p 16).

Sadly, much of that heated debate has been within the sector rather than located within a wider, more reflective, discussion on civil society; generating heat rather than light. Further, questions may be raised around NCIA’s vision of radical action being located in informal, below the radar, groups as TSRC research in this area suggests there has been a retreat by community groups themselves from ‘taking on the big issues’.

The hopes that early austerity measures would be a passing phase have faded to a point of disillusion. The anticipated contribution to democratic renewal also begs the question of whether citizens, communities, have sufficient trust in traditional political systems to engage in those formal democratic processes. Indeed much of the political emphasis in the ‘trust debate’ has been horizontal and related to cohesion and trust within and between communities. Less attention has been paid in formal policy, debates and in the academic literature on the voluntary sector (Cooper 2008, Kenny et al 2015) in terms of parallel issues of trust ‘vertically’ – between citizen’s, their Government and elected members; the nature of democracy that communities can, or are willing to, engage with. Is it purely representative or deliberative democracy or does direct action and participatory democracy also have a legitimacy?

Taking on ‘the big issues’: Power and community groups in austere times

Linked to a decreasing policy interest in community groups and communities are, quite specific, issues on voice and influence (addressed further in chapter 13).

Under New Labour, the community ‘sector’ had a seat at the policy table through Departmental Strategic Partnership arrangements. Whilst it is difficult to attribute influential outcomes to this period in terms of policy and legislation, community remained, at least, on the agenda. Strategic Partnerships have now gone as have the regional government structures in which community groups were represented in some way. Regional Development Agencies and Government Offices for the Regions were early casualties of austerity measures and have been replaced by, largely private sector driven, Local Economic Partnerships which have far less interest in community action. Further, those national bodies ‘representing’ community sector interests have all but disappeared – with the closures of the Community Development Exchange (2102) and the Urban Forum (2014) through to the loss of the Community Development Foundation and Community Matters in 2016.

The ending of these national infrastructure and support programmes and organisationsre, however, largely mechanistic issues of governance. Perhaps more profound forces are at play around

questions of whether citizens and communities want to join the Government, or at least the management of current state services, or whether they are best served by taking action out with Government. Indeed, this may be true if referring to Government's mobilisation of people to achieve a particular state agenda. Indeed as Lord Wei acknowledged in a speech to the Institute for Government (6 July 2010) that 'Government is not very good at mobilising mass civic action'.

Where Government (both national and local) has actually been extremely successful in galvanising community action is when it has angered people. In the last decade, such 'successes' have included the campaigns against the banning of fox hunting and the high speed rail link (HS2) between Birmingham and London, the anti-Iraq war demonstrations, anti-globalisation actions at the G8 and G20 Summits and most recently communities lobbying local and central government on the Syrian refugee crisis. Research at the TSRC shows how anger is one of the key motivators for spurring communities to galvanise into action (Phillimore & McCabe 2014). These have been isolated, single cause, campaigns rather than constituting Lord Wei's 'mass civic action'.

At the local level there continues to be numerous examples of communities taking action on environmental issues and again, anger is a key motivator. Yet this is often an under-recognised aspect of community motivations to participate. Systems for community engagement over the last decade, have stressed the value of 'participation' or perhaps more accurately 'consultation', but underplayed both the creative and potentially destructive aspects of these strategies in terms of generating tensions between the state and communities and indeed between communities. Rather, emphasis has been placed on models of consensus building which could be alternatively interpreted as mechanisms for conflict avoidance (YHEP, 2009).

In terms of understanding community participation either in the double devolution of New Labour or the Coalition's 'Big Society', there are two further political issues which bear some consideration.

Firstly, there is, and has been, a lack of systematic analysis of power relationships between communities, the state and the corporate sector. This may seem a strange statement given that the themes of trust in politics and power run through Building Britain's Future (2009) to statements on 'Big Society'. David Cameron (Fixing Broken Politics 26th May 2010), for example has argued that citizens and communities:

> 'See a world that is built to benefit powerful elites, and they feel a terrible but impotent anger. So we rage at our political system because we feel it is self-serving, not serving us. Pounded by forces outside their control, people feel increasingly powerless... deprived of opportunities to shape the world around them, and at the mercy of powerful elites that preside over them'.

Then, there are statements such as: 'Only when people are given more power…can we achieve fairness and opportunity for all.' (Cabinet Office, 2010). Yet, at the same time, equalities have slipped off the Government's agenda (Jackson and Clark 2012, Silver 2012), with growing inequalities and disillusionment with 'powerful elites' has continued to grow (Henderson and Vercseg 2010, Sayer 2015).

The emphasis then is on devolving power to the neighbourhood or 'nano-level'. Yet as David Cameron's speech implies, power, real power, is rarely given away but has to be seized (Gramsci 1929). Setting aside this ideological argument, the reality is that whilst communities can affect change, there are structural and global factors (from mass unemployment to the power of multi-national corporations and global warming) that cannot be easily solved at a nation state level, let alone a 'nano' community level (Emejulu 2015).

Secondly, this concept of power at the neighbourhood or nano level raises questions about the role of the state itself. The implication is that by devolving power to communities and creating a 'small state' vertical trust between formal politics and citizens will somehow be restored. However, this assumption avoids, or perhaps does not fully address, the question of what the role of the state within, or in relationship to, civil society is, can or should be – and even less attention has been paid to the role of the private sector. Freedom in the World (2005) expressed concern that 'small states' are often actually failing states lacking the power to maintain law and order.

Then there are the arguments presented by Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) that Governments have a central role in ensuring checks and balances within economic and social systems that reduce inequality and promote healthier, more prosperous yet equal societies. Further, writing in the Guardian (20th July 2010) Anne Coote, Head of Social Policy at the New Economics Foundation, warns:

> 'We do need a state that is democratically controlled, and that enables everyone to play a part and acts as an effective mediator and protector of our shared interests. Democratic government is the only effective vehicle for ensuring that resources are fairly distributed, both across the population and between individuals and groups at local levels.'

Beyond a debate on the role of governments in civil society, there is, and has been, an underlying assumption (which also underpinned much of New Labour's policies) that all community engagement, all social action is good. Community groups can be 'autonomous, empowered and dynamic' but may also be (seen from a different perspective) 'dissenting, resistant, dysfunctional and destructive'[ii] or indeed oppressive, as, for example, can be seen by the co-option of community development by the Far Right.

The lack of acknowledgement of anger as a motivator for social action and the lack of a systemic analysis of power and the role of the state in civil society present real challenges to the idea of devolving power to communities. Yet there may be other, much more personal, barriers to making the aspirations of 'Big Society into reality.

Whilst there is a body of literature on what motivates formal volunteering (Davis Smith, 1998; Locke, 2008) the drivers for community engagement are not well understood at a policy level, – nor is 'enough known about the skills and support citizens need [to be active]. This is particularly true for hard to reach groups which are currently least likely to be engaged' (Rogers and Robinson, 2004: 7).

A sense of civic duty may be one factor in voluntary action. However, being active in a community is primarily social. Even in campaigning groups there is a strong driver to meet people, feel connected and have fun (Phillimore *et al* 2010). This is not to minimise the value of community

based social activity. It is something wider and deeper than 'volunteering as serious leisure' (Rochester et al., 2009: 13) and the organisation of sporting activities. It is about the basic social needs of humans to interact. Clubs, societies, village fetes etc. all make significant contributions to social cohesion as well as to combating isolation and promoting health and mental wellbeing. These are all Government agendas (both now and in the recent past) but these outcomes are not why those groups exist merely a by-product of their existence. They are there to meet basic human needs, not deliver on policy agendas. The lack of focus on explicit Government goals can be seen either as a weakness in community based activity – or as a celebration of the independence of civil society and its motivators from the state and raises the question – can such activities be co-opted into delivering Government agendas?

Final reflections

The Carnegie UK Trust Commission of Enquiry into the Future of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland (2010: 3) commented:

> 'Civil society activity meets fundamental human wants and needs, and provides an expression for hopes and aspirations. It reaches parts of our lives and souls that are beyond the state and business. It takes much of what we care about most in our private lives and gives it shape and structure. Helping us amplify care, compassion and hope.'

Below the radar community groups, despite a decline in policy interest, despite austerity, continue to meet those 'fundamental human wants'. However, as Oppenheim *et al*. (2010, 4) warned 'simply rolling back the state and expecting communities to leap into the driving seat will not be the answer'. Indeed, Bacon *et al*., writing for the Young Foundation (2010) note that governments of whatever shade have not, and are not, best equipped to understand and support wellbeing in communities and, with a tendency towards 'discreet silos of service' (Sampson and Weaver, 2010: 1) are ill-suited to meeting community needs holistically or flexibly. This last point may well be an argument for the devolution of power and service delivery to communities where there can be a more detailed knowledge of community needs and holistic responses to those needs (Phillimore *et al* 2010).

These responses are, however, increasingly at a micro level. The exploring of alliances in the face of the cuts found during early below the radar research (between, for example Tenants and Residents groups and young people concerned with youth service) have all but disappeared. There has, in some ways, been a retreat at the community level. If poverty and inequality cannot be addressed at a macro level, then social relationships, community networks, may mitigate against their worst effects locally (McCabe et al 2013).

Over the last two decades, Governments' interest in community and community groups has waxed and waned: communities have, variously been part of the solution or part of the problem. Yet, within a shifting policy landscape, two questions remain: questions that go beyond austerity measures.

Firstly, can community trust in politics be restored with the rolling back of the welfare state to a residual role where consumers with resources have more access to quality choices whilst services for the poor become poor services? Secondly, can policies which appear to lack a systemic analysis of

power and the role of the state in relation to civil society, really deliver equality or fairness as David Cameron has suggested? The views of Henry Tam (2010: 121), reflecting on power, inequality and equality remain timely:

> 'Resistance to progressive reforms, at the local, national and global levels, will undoubtedly persist. Short-term concessions from the powerful should not be mistaken for lasting achievements. Where arbitrary power can still be exercised by the rich over the poor, bosses over workers, parents over their children, men over women, wardens over inmates, superpowers over small countries, one ethnic group over another, the weaker groups will remain at the mercy of the strong, and routinely suffer as a result of their malice or misjudgement. So long as such iniquities exist, the struggle for inclusive communities will continue'.

What is being played out where???is a fundamental shift in the relationship between communities, community groups and the state. The end game, however, is not in sight.

Reflective Exercises

Reflect on why government and policy makers interest in communities and community groups may 'wax and wane'.

Consider the statement that communities and community groups have 'retreated' from the big issues over the last decade (poverty, inequality etc) to focus on social relationships and community networks at the micro-level.

Has the relationship between the state and small community/civil society organisations changed fundamentally. What is the evidence from your experience and why might this be?

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